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AUTHOR Murray, Donald M.
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ABSTRACT

Revision--the process of seeing what you've said to discover what you have to say--is the activating force within most established writers. Since most writers need to revise over and over, teachers should not communicate revision to students as punishment. Many students are given only one opportunity to produce a writing project, but students should be encouraged to revise. The great majority of "writing" teachers have seldom or never written a story or a poem. They are fans, not players; critics, not participants. A teacher who is writing along with the students will learn to spot the potential that lies within a student's writing. A teacher's application of critical or scholarly tools to the writing product may cripple the students' writing efforts. When a teacher is willing to become involved in writing alongside the students and to encourage revision, students will become excited about their own writing.
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TEACH THE MOTIVATING FORCE OF REVISION

Donald M. Murray

Donald M. Murray
The University of New Hampshire

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES
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Revision--the process of seeing what you've said to discover what you have to say--is the motivating force within most writers. They are compelled to write to see what their words tell them.

Revision can also be the motivating force within students--if they are given the opportunity to experience the adventure of rewriting. Unfortunately most Language Arts and English teachers do not appreciate the importance or the excitement of revision. They teach rewriting--if they teach it at all--as punishment, the price you have to pay if you don't get it right the first time.

But few, if any, writers ever get it right the first time. They write to catch a glimpse of what they may see and then revise--and revise and revise and revise--to make it come clear. Jules Feiffer talks of writing Knock, Knock: "I had nothing particular in mind, so I did what actors do when they improvise, I put two people in a room and had them start talking."

It is the mystery, the suspense and the surprise that pulls the writer forward. "I feel the same excitement a reader feels," Jessamyn West explains, "because my characters say and do things I don't know they are going to say and do." Larry McMurty adds, "... the writing of a book is the process of finding out how it turned out that way."

Since the writer doesn't know what the pen is going to put on the page, the first task of revision is vision. The writer must stand back from the work the way any craftsman does to see what has been done. The writer reads with wonder and with care to find out what the page may be saying. Writers often know more clearly what they don't want to say than what they do. "Artists don't always know what they are doing, but they are usually aware of what they are not doing." Robert Motherwell

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continues, "What I reject, I'm conscious of. What I'm striving for is only dimly perceived."

This process of moving towards meaning implies a continual process of revision. Writers have to see what is on the page and then decide to cut, change, or keep it. Economist John Kenneth Galbraith states, "... there are days when the result is so bad that no fewer than five revisions are required. In contrast, when I'm greatly inspired, only four revisions are needed."

We are beginning to understand that the role of discovery is crucial to effective writing--in technical reports as well as poems, political essays as well as short stories, research papers as well as movie scripts. Sheridan Baker points out, "... the process of writing is a process of discovery. Everyone who writes has experienced this process, has discovered, through writing it out, what he has in mind. Yet this simple fact is one not frequently propounded in our textbooks."

Richard L. Larson emphasizes the importance of this process, "The power of making discoveries--of drawing connections between bits of experience so that they reveal or point to new ideas and problems, of asking questions in such a way that they can be answered with fresh insights into a subject--is, I suggest, one of the powers that makes education possible. Without it, the student is an assimilator of knowledge, a sponge soaking up and occasionally releasing information supplied by others. With it, the student can make independent sense of the diverse experiences that he or she encounters in college and outside, and can even operate on what we sometimes call the frontiers of knowledge. I suggest that English, particularly the teaching of composing, look toward giving the students the ability to make discovery."

Larson goes on, quite properly, to praise the important work which has been done on invention and prewriting. He does not mention the work being done connecting the process of discovery with the processes of revision, rewriting and editing, probably because very little work is being done in this area. Yet it often seems to the writer that the most important discoveries are made during the process of revision.

There are two forms of revision--one internal and one external. Internal revision occurs when writers are trying to find out what they have to say; external revision when they know what they have to say and are revising or editing their work so it can be understood by another audience. These two forms of revision, of course, overlap, but I believe they are distinct and significant. Writers must first understand what they are saying if others are to understand what was said.

Revision can be dull work indeed if the writer is only trying to conform to a particular set of editorial conventions, if the process of discovery is concluded and there are no surprises lurking on the page. But that is not revision. Writers find their writing alive under their pens. What they have to say is continually evolving beneath the hand.

What a motivating force this is. As writers, we are drawn forward to see what argument comes forth in our essays, to find out if hero becomes victim in our novels, to discover the reason for an historic event in our biographies, to experience the image which makes a blurred snapshot in our memory come clear in our poems. I received a magazine assignment to write a report on the elderly imprisoned in county homes. It was never written, but I have published a novel which has taken me inside the body of a young man who is a quadriplegic, who cannot move his arms or his legs. I set out to write a piece of journalism and found a novel. It could as easily have gone the other way. The writer is continually surprised by where language leads.

I face a pad of paper and find myself writing of a black bird which seems to fly through a tree outside my study window and find myself, more than ten years later, having taken a trip into my past where I meet my parents in a series of poems, understanding them a bit better than I ever did while they were alive.

Will the reader share my understanding? I hope so, but that is a small matter. No reader's response, no publication or award will come close to the explorations and discoveries I have made, all unexpected and unpremeditated, within the writing process while I am alone at my desk in the early morning. In rewriting and rewriting this article I have not reported what I knew about the teaching of rewriting as much as I have thought through an important irony: most teachers are convinced, in advance, that their poorest students will refuse to rewrite while actually the strongest force to motivate those reluctant writers may be the act of revision. Of course I want to communicate this opinion in this article, but I must admit the greatest satisfaction is in making these small, personal statements to myself, not in publishing them. The older I get the longer completed manuscripts rest on my desk, not because I am shy but because once the discovery has been made by me to me, I am on to new territory in other pieces of writing.

Teachers, who have not experienced this process of discovery through language we call writing are convinced their students will not want to rewrite. And they will not, if those teachers

communicate rewriting as punishment. And yet these same teachers, when they do a paper in a course, feel they could do better if only they had another chance. The process-centered writing curriculum gives students that other chance.

Most students, in fact, find this other chance--this opportunity to rewrite--as exciting to them, even as necessary to them, as it is to writers. Writing is no longer a matter of rules or exercises. It is what they do to find out something about themselves or something about a subject in which they are interested. Students, like writers, will be driven to revise--to read and rewrite--in order to find out what they have to say.

And the force which motivates the student to write, may motivate the teacher who has previously dreaded the pile of completed writing assignments. As the student begins to make discoveries on the page, the writing teacher has the privilege of sharing those discoveries. The teacher is not reading assignments which are, at best, predictable and fulfilled, the writing teacher shares the excitement of the unexpected subject, the evolving form, the astonishment of the word that is almost wrong and exactly right.

Yesterday a student asked me in conference, "What are you doing?" It was a fair question. I was dressed in what passes for University of New Hampshire faculty style--L.L. Bean shirt and Dunham boots--leaning back in my chair, feet on my desk, chatting about old cars and how he felt about them. It might not seem that I was doing anything, and he was paying for the course out of his own pocket.

"I'm following your piece of writing."

He looked puzzled.

"To see where it may take you."

"But I'm kind of tired of it. I don't know if I want to write about that old Volvo any more."

"Fine. No need to. I'm just kind of interested in that guy who is so involved in that car he can describe it in hundreds of details. I can see the car now, in this draft, but I'm getting more interested in the guy who saw a vision of a fine car in that rusty hunk of junk. It might be a story."

We sit quietly for a couple of minutes.

"But I can't write a story."

"What do you mean?"

"Well I don't know exactly what I want to say. I haven't got any themes. I mean writing fiction, you have to know so much." He draws a huge map in the air, "Like Tolstoy. A whole world. How everything fits in."

We chat about how writers discover what they have to say, how little they know, how essential is my ignorance of what happens in the next chapter of the novel I am drafting. I point out that he may discover an article on rebuilding junk cars, on mechanics who gouge the unsuspecting, on how to save money repairing a car. We even discuss the possibility of a girl who waves to the fellow working on the car which makes him write a story in which there is no Volvo at all. Our fifteen minutes is up. He turns at the door, "What do you want me to do?"

"Write."

"Well, what? What do you expect me to do?"

"Whatever you want. I want to be surprised. You don't know what you're going to write, how can I know? It wouldn't be any fun if I did."

Well, what will he do? I really do not know. I can make no prediction and would not if I could. That is the fun in teaching writing. He will write something; that is required. More than likely, he will write what he does not expect to write. The subject or the form or the language will change under his hand. It will surprise him and it will surprise me. That is why I turn eagerly to my students' papers. Not to correct them, never to correct them--that is their job--but to find out what they have to say, to see their worlds through their eyes.

In one day I read the papers of dozens of students and in conference share with them the experience of finding subjects which are new to them, of recreating the old forms of literature in a way that serves their needs in making our language their language.

That is also the reason I prefer to teach beginning students, especially remedial students. The reluctant writers have no idea of the importance and excitement of writing, no suspicion that rewriting will let them see their worlds more clearly than they ever have before by using the lens of language.

In teaching beginning students there is no content in the writing course until they put it in. All the teaching is responsive. Perhaps they only list specifics at first, but they write. And as they put down the concrete details about their world, usually starting with description, they begin to see the world in a way they have never seen it before.

This becomes apparent to them and to their teacher, because the teacher first asks each student what the student thinks of the paper. There are generally two responses.

The student may be surprised at finding out what appeared during the process of rewriting. The student may never have heard of Robert Frost who said, "For me the initial delight is in the surprise of remembering something I didn't know I knew." With the student, it may come out, "Well, gee, I mean, it was kinda like, I mean, well, you know, I never thought of it that way, it was different sort of not what I expected." Don't worry about the syntax. That student is hooked on writing.

The beginning student is more likely not to be aware of any discovery on the page. Most students do not think they have anything to say and the tragedy is that their teachers agree with them. It is the job of the writing teacher to find what is on the page which may be hidden from the student. It may be a word that has potential ("I was enlarged when the bully came after my sister."), an interesting and potentially significant fact ("Bird watchers like pollution. They know some pollution is good for birds."), a phrase that rubs two unexpected words together and gives off a meaning ("My mother was taught to be a lady. She can softly slam a door."), a point of view ("Sometimes it seems like the smaller and poorer the houses, the bigger the churches.")

The writing teacher may not be able to locate the potential in the language on the page but may just hear a tone of voice, feel a sense of humor or a sense of rage, recognize a potential area of authority. It is good enough, in the beginning to respond to that.

"Sounds to me like you've got a real gripe with motorcycle manufacturers."

"You know it."

"Well, tell me about it. It sounds interesting. Something people ought to know."

"O.K."

The potential may not even be on the page or anywhere near it. Then it is the job of the writing teacher to draw out of the student an area in which the student is an authority or could become an authority.

"What do you think of your paper?"

"I dunno"

"Did you find anything out in writing it?"

"Nope"

"What do you do outside of school?"

"Hang around."

"Where?"

"At a fillin' station. The Amoco on Hancock Street."

"Interested in cars?"

"nope."

"Well, what happens at the station?"

"Not much."

"Nothing interesting?"

"Well, these guys came in the other night, asked me to go for a ride with 'em."

"Well?"

"You read about it in the papers. They killed a guy. I didn't know they had a gun."

"Why didn't you go with them?"

"I don't know. Too lazy I guess. I've wondered about it."

"Could you wonder on paper?"

"I guess."

That happened to me. Not as a teacher. As a student. But no teacher ever drew it out of me--but they could have. And if

they had, I might have graduated from high school. There is potential even in the most unlikely student, and it may take a teacher all of ten minutes to tap it. The potential might have been realized in a series of drafts exploring a casual decision made during a boring teen-age evening.

It is worth noting that the teacher should not command re-writing. In fact, the teacher may rarely use such words as revision or rewriting. The teacher expresses interest in the subject the student is writing and the student discovers, without realizing it, what Gore Vidal describes, "I am an obsessive rewriter, doing one draft then another and another, usually five. In a way, I have nothing to say, but a great deal to add."

Lack of development--an unsufficient amount of information--is the writer's primary problem. The professional writer learns this from editors and readers (usually with great resistance and complaint - writers know what they have said, why don't readers know it) but a sufficient amount of information can be drawn out of the student writer by a patient and skillful writing teacher. The students, at first, become unconscious rewriters and later put a name to what has become an essential and rewarding part of the writing process. First the student must experience the excitement of discovery, later understand the process which produced the discovery. The student writes drafts before calling them drafts.

How does the teacher learn to spot the potential which lies within a student's writing or a student's experience so the teacher can encourage discovery? By being a writer. This does not mean that writing teachers should be Writers, with a capital W. It does mean they should frequently use language in a search for meaning; have recently experienced firsthand the terror and joy of putting words on paper. The single most dramatic change that can be made in a Language Arts or English teacher who wants to teach writing is for the teacher to write with the students.

It is hard to imagine a music teacher who has never made music, or an art teacher who has never drawn a picture but, unfortunately, it is normal to have writing teachers who have written only academic papers--and shockingly few of those. The great majority of "writing" teachers have never written a story or a poem, never felt language leading them across the page.

The teacher should write with the student, showing the student how badly the writer writes, revealing the failures and mistakes and stupidities and awkwardnesses that clumsily lead the writer toward meaning, a meaning the writer did not expect, perhaps did not even want to accept. The teacher writes

beside the student. the way the oboe teacher plays along with the student oboist, sharing the challenge of their art.

The big problem in the development of effective writing teachers is that most Language Arts and English teachers have been trained as reading teachers, literary critics, or, occasionally, students of the science of language. Most have been excused from Freshman English, which is not usually a writing course; few have ever taken a course in writing or the teaching of writing. They are fans, not players; critics, not participants.

If students are to learn to write then the writing teachers must cross over from the role of critic to player. The worst model for the writing class is for the teacher to be standing at the front of the room talking; the best model is for the teacher to be sitting at the rear of the room writing.

There are real hazards when teachers apply critical or scholarly tools to the product of writing in an effort to teach writing. They may, for example, tell the student, "You have to know what you want to say before you say it." We have all heard teachers say this. It seems logical if you have spent your time in examining the well-made products of literature. But it may be a misconception which makes it impossible for the students to write well. The fact is that most writers, most of the time, do not know what they want to say before they say it. Some may not even know what they have said after they have said it. Writing is not necessarily built by accretion, but scholarship. It may be the piling up of blocks, but it may also be the shooting of an arrow at a moving target only dimly perceived.

The untruths about the writing process, however, may be less important than the attitude the non-writing writing teacher brings to class. The teacher with sharp critical or scholarly tools may deal in absolutes, inhibiting or limiting the student writer. The writing teacher who writes, on the other hand, may be able to enter into the process of individual exploration with each student. The teacher who is experiencing important and surprising discoveries through language is likely to share and support each student's individual exploration of the world. The discoveries they make together is the energizing force which drives the writing course forward.

Because of this force, the teacher becomes less important towards the end of the writing course. The students have the scent of their own meanings. They are off and the teacher is not leading but hurrying after them, trying to keep up.

* The students are driven to write by the motivating force of revision, of reading what they have written to discover what they have to say.